

Great Bird Hunting (on Public Land)!

by Jesse Garcia

Hunters can expect excellent chukar and quail hunting in some parts of the state during 2005, thanks to abundant rainfall last winter and a series of well-timed spring storms.

These conditions have created exceptional nesting and brood rearing habitat for chukar and quail, particularly in the Gambel's quail range where rainfall was nearly three times the norm. Under these conditions, nesting Gambel's quail pairs sometimes will hatch two broods. In the Central Coast Hydrologic Region, which received 180 percent of average precipitation, improved nesting conditions in coastal habitats south of Santa Cruz should also promote double broods by California quail. In southern California, the chukar range in these areas (South Coast Ranges and Mojave Desert) also benefited from the exceptional rainfall. Because of these weather conditions, hunters can expect to encounter greater numbers of large coveys this fall.

In addition, some 3,000 gallinaceous guzzlers will provide water to the expanded quail populations during the summer and fall. This will help sustain them until the next cycle of rain. Guzzlers are man-made underground water storage devices designed to collect water during the rainy season for use by quail and other wildlife during the dry season. They are installed by the DFG and regularly inspected and maintained by members of the nonprofit group Quail Unlimited.

I contacted DFG wildlife biologists throughout the state to help me create a statewide hunt forecast, including the best public areas to hunt. (By Tracks' press



date, young quail and chukar counts had not been completed in some areas.)

Northern California-North Coast Region

According to DFG wildlife biologist Frank Hall, northern California quail production is dependent on spring and summer rainfall. "We received very heavy snow in January of 2005, but minimal quail mortality," said Hall. "As we head into the summer, we're hoping for a repeat of the precipitation patterns we saw during the

summers of 2003 and 2004. Those conditions were about as good as it gets for quail production."

In Lassen, Modoc and eastern Siskiyou and Shasta counties, hunters can expect to find California quail near riparian and mixed shrub areas. For mountain quail, look for brush patches in montane conifer stands west of, and near, the Sierra Crest. Chukars in eastern Lassen County are in rockier cheatgrass and sage areas, from about 4,500 feet elevation to near

the tops of non-tree covered peaks at about 8,000 feet.

For better chukar hunting prospects on U. S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands in eastern Lassen County, hunt Skedaddle Mountains, Shaffer Mountain, Five Springs Mountain, Cherry Mountain, Shinn Peak, Black's Mount, Rush Creek Mountain, and Al Shinn Canyon. There are lesser numbers in the Fort Sage and Peterson mountains.

Since these areas are scattered over about 10 million acres on four national forests and five BLM field offices, contact the U. S. Forest Service and BLM directly for maps and additional information.

San Joaquin Valley-Southern Sierra Region

In the four-county boundary area of Inyo, Kern, San Bernardino, and Tulare counties, DFG wildlife biologist Rocky Thompson expects quail brood counts to be very high this year. He says, "Hunters should expect a great year for quail and chukar hunting in the Southern Sierra and Mojave Desert. The Rand (mostly chukar here) and El Paso Mountains and the canyons of the eastern slope of the Southern Sierra will be good for desert hunters and, for quail hunters in general, all of the Southern Sierra looks like a good bet."

Eastern Sierra-Inland Desert Region

For Mono County, wildlife biologist Timothy Taylor of the DFG's Eastern Sierra and Inland Deserts Region reports that the 2005/06 valley quail and chukar season is expected to be an improvement over last year due to the high number of adult birds making up this year's breeding population. "Good adult carryover and excellent habitat conditions this spring will allow chukar populations in Mono County to continue an upward trend," said Taylor. "The fall season is predicted to be generally good for chukar and valley quail because of increased bird numbers and the number of young birds available to hunters. Adult carryover in mountain quail is generally poor due to the dry conditions in 2003/04. However, the 2005/06 season is expected to be an improvement over last year due to excellent habitat conditions and the resultant number of young birds available to hunters."

For the majority of San Bernardino County, DFG wildlife biologist Andy Pauli is expecting exceptional upland game hunting opportunities to be provided in the Mojave Desert this year. According to Pauli, above average rainfall over the past three years—and especially this year—has provided lots of hold-over birds (both quail and chukar) to repro-



duce this year. He says, "I have already seen broods of 15-20 young this year. I expect that mid-summer brood counts will reflect excellent reproduction throughout the desert areas. I have found a good number of birds in places where I haven't seen them in over 20 years. As an added bonus, both cottontail and jackrabbit numbers are way up." All upland game species can be found in desert washes, upland habitats, and up to the base of the mountains.

The western Mojave Desert is best for chukar hunting, including: Red Mountain, Stoddard Ridge, Opal Mountain, Black Mountain, Ord Mountains and other traditional sites. Many of the eastern Mojave Desert areas can be excellent for Gambel's quail hunting, and include: Providence Mountain,

Previous page: Debbie Schwiebert is on her way to a limit of quail.

Top: Gambel's quail use open spaces of desert wash habitat to escape hunters, usually by running. Hunters should be prepared to also run.

Left: Dog tired after a successful day of chukar hunting in Lassen County.



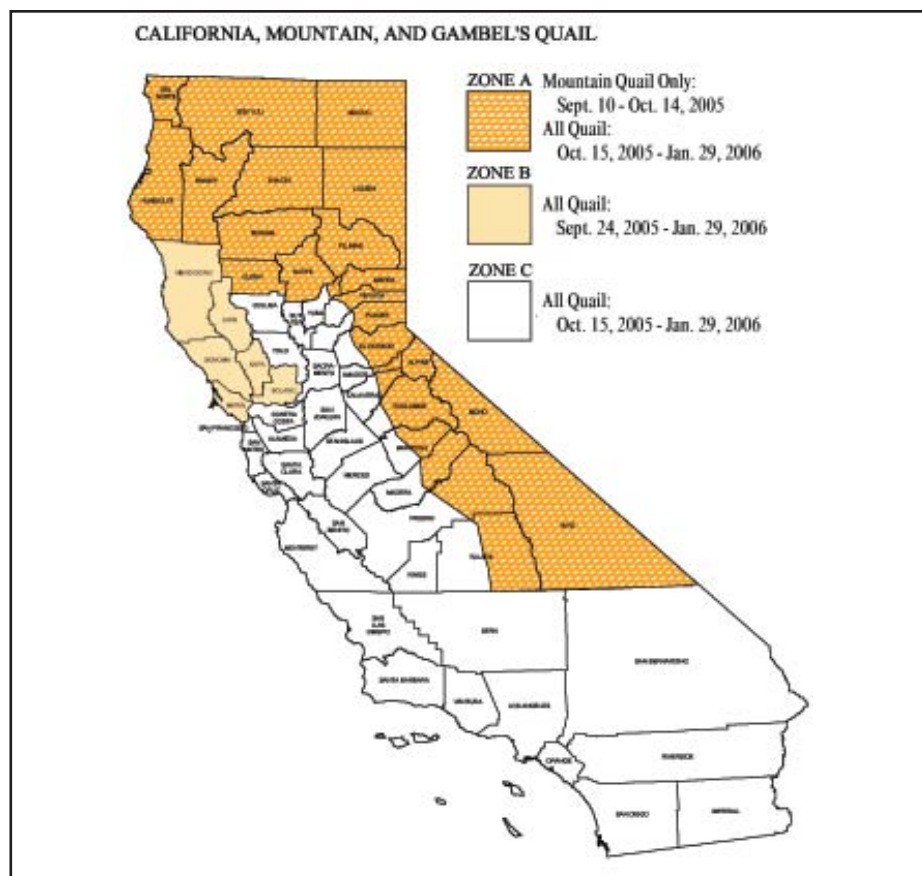
New York Mountain, Hackberry Mountain, Woods Mountain area, Piute Mountains, Clark Mountains (all located within Mojave National Preserve [MNP]), the Old Woman Mountains, Sacramento Mountains, and the Chemehuevi Mountains, on BLM lands. Maps of the area can be obtained at BLM offices located in Barstow and Needles and at MNP visitor centers at Barstow and Baker.

South Coast Region

For the South Coast region, DFG wildlife biologist Randy Botta conveys his assessment of the desert regions of western Riverside and eastern San Diego counties. "Green-up" actually began during the summer of 2004 with exceptional rainfall, that resulted in early flower bloom. That green-up lasted into December of 2004, at which time the winter rains began. Growth of herbaceous plants and forbs was exceptional throughout the desert, mountain, and inland areas of the south coast during the later part of last winter through spring. Available water (ponds, reservoirs, creeks, springs, seeps, guzzlers) is widespread in the mountains and inland valleys at a time when desert areas have begun to diminish a bit. Snowfall was light in the mountains of San Diego County and other mountain ranges in the South Coast Region. Late precipitation occurred but was generally light and scattered.

"Gambel's and California quail should show improvement. I have recently observed large broods of Gambel's quail on the ground but have yet to observe any young California quail," said Botta.

Hunting during last season was pretty mixed for California and mountain quail. In San Diego County, some hunters found good hunting and plenty of birds while others reported small numbers or no birds in areas that previously supported coveys. This year, hunters are likely to find birds more widespread and, in some areas, in greater numbers than last year.



For eastern Imperial and Riverside counties, DFG wildlife biologist Gerald Mulcahy of the Department's Eastern Sierra and Inland Deserts Region says, "The upcoming season looks like it may finally be significant. Reproduction took place last year but numbers were so low the year before that coveys that previously had 100 plus birds were down to 5-8 birds," said Mulcahy. "Last year we saw that these numbers had improved slightly, to 20-30 birds per covey. With the excellent rains of this last winter, and the fact that we are seeing broods already of 12 to 14 chicks, I believe that this year we may see a better hunting opportunity. The main desert washes will be the most productive areas to hunt."

Mulcahy is referring to major washes such as Arroyo Seco, Julian, Milpitas, and Vinagre washes. He reminds hunters they will need to obtain BLM maps that show wilderness boundaries. He cautions, "Almost all of the mountain ranges down here in Imperial and Riverside counties are wilderness areas. Hunters have to be responsible

when accessing these areas, as vehicles are not allowed. Hunting is permissible if they walk in. Birds will most likely be widely scattered as feed is abundant everywhere."

The DFG has a free publication called *Guide to Hunting Quail in California*. It provides information necessary to find and identify quail, how and where to hunt quail (with and without a dog), and how to care for bagged quail. It also shows chukar hunting locations. It can be downloaded from the DFG Web site at <http://www.dfg.ca.gov/coned/quailguide.pdf>. Printed copies can be obtained by writing to: California Department of Fish and Game, Wildlife Programs Branch, Upland Game Program, 1812 Ninth Street, Sacramento, CA 95814.

Be sure to carry plenty of water while hunting as it still can be quite hot early in the season—particularly in the desert areas. The latest Game Take Hunter Survey data available is for the 2003 – 2004 license year. Reported hunter take for the four species are as follows: California quail – 540,417; Gambel's quail – 59,369; mountain quail – 148,222; Indian chukar – 46,496.

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